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The University of
Montana

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NEWS RELEASE

Sept. 2, 2003

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UM INTRODUCES A NEW WWW.UMT.EDU

MISSOULA—

Alissa Herbaly Coons
UM Home Page Redesign Team

Gone are the days of ambiguous navigation, utter dependence on the A-Z index, and that cute blonde cheerleader who smiled obliviously on as you stumbled around The University of Montana's Web site home page, looking for something that just wasn't there.

As the novelty of the Internet has worn off, the home page at www.umt.edu has evolved from a side-project of computer nerds to a vital mainstream tool. So, after three years of service, the old UM home page is retiring in favor of a lighter, fresher, more practical site. The new site debuts today as a beta version linked from the old site. It will replace the old site Sept. 17 after an adjustment period.

The new site gives viewers a simple, yet comprehensive look at the University, offers current UM news and events, and provides quick access to pages throughout the site.

Rick Hughes, Home Page Redesign Subcommittee chairman, said, "The primary task facing us in recreating the Web site was to design and build an infrastructure that met the needs of our large and diverse academic community, while creating an overall sense of place and

-more-

purpose that reflected the spirit of The University of Montana.”

Using the new site

Eight months and some 1,400 work hours later, the inaugural version of the new UM Web site is ready to go.

The center of the home page is dedicated to University feature stories, news headlines and current events. At the bottom of the page, you can meet the “Faces” of UM by reading casual interviews with various people around campus.

To access University sites and information, follow two main navigation paths: audience- or action-based. Answer the question “Who are you?” to choose audience navigation (e.g. “current student” or “faculty/staff”). Or, answer the question “What do you want to do?” for action navigation (e.g. “learn,” “visit”). Both types of navigation will take you to landing pages that list relevant information and links, while a drop-down menu under the audience navigation provides shortcuts to popular UM destinations.

Other new home page elements include:

- “Discover UM” – for information about campus and community.
- “Tools” and “Resources” – customizable links to your favorite UM pages.
- a Google-powered search box.
- an improved A-Z index – regularly updated links to UM sites.
- academic and student directories.

Martha Burtis, UM director of Web development, said, “One of the main features we’ve focused on is breadth of navigation, as opposed to depth. Before, (users) had to drill

down through the Web site. We've tried to make it take a lot fewer clicks to get where they're going."

Background and research

The new site has been in the works since summer 2002, when the UM Web Development Committee decided it was time to hire a staff to develop and maintain important UM Web services.

Patia Stephens, a 2000 UM journalism graduate who now is UM Web content manager, explained the move: "After a long, dry spell with no funding for UM's Web site, people finally realized the need to invest in it, because of its incredible potential for reaching potential students and all of our various constituencies."

In October 2002, UM hired Burtis, armed with an advanced degree in instructional technology from Columbia University, to take charge of UM's neglected Web development program. One of her first goals was to create a new home page.

"It was clear from my first interview that campus felt strongly about getting a new site up," Burtis said.

In February 2003, the Home Page Redesign Subcommittee – made up of about 12 members of the Web Development Committee, including Burtis and Stephens – started laying the foundation for the new site. They surveyed UM home page users to identify their primary needs, categorized types of users and their needs and analyzed other university Web sites to see what works for them and what could work well at UM.

Hughes said, "After months of research, survey analysis and user testing, which was

based upon an exceptionally well-organized project plan devised by Martha Burtis, and was characterized by open and honest dialogue between the committee members and the University community at large, construction of the site began.

“We put together a dynamic student redesign team,” Hughes continued, “and their energy, creativity and collaborative abilities resulted in a truly impressive and first-rate Web site that will enable The University of Montana to move forward with a new and exciting Internet presence.”

Creation and development

The Home Page Redesign Team comprised:

- Aaron Conway, a graphic design graduate of Minnesota State University Mankato, who designed the look and feel of the new site, emphasizing UM's unique character and natural surroundings.
- Alissa Herbaly Coons, a senior in print journalism, who worked on feature stories, profiled community members for the “Faces” section, and edited copy, photos and links to complete each page.
- Chris Yates, a senior in computer science, who produced and programmed much of the site. One of his favorite new features is the customizable tools and resources section. This option meets the needs of individual users by personalizing a large, otherwise impersonal site.
- Pobzeb Armerding, a senior in computer science, who designed a dynamic content management system to monitor the entire site, which makes routine

maintenance and the addition of fresh content a much simpler task than before.

Stephens, who produced the news service Today @ UM for University Relations, has been actively involved in planning, writing and editing content for the new site, and is in charge of maintaining the news and events section on the home page.

"Today @ UM has been a good start, but I want to make the home page more responsive, and to make more news available to our readers," Stephens said.

Burtis added, "We've tried to emphasize putting new content on the page, so it's actually somewhere someone might go to find something out, as opposed to find a link."

In the near future, improvements to the new site will include a better events calendar, currently in development. Minor updates to the site will occur throughout the school year, Burtis said, and major changes will be made during vacation periods. The site also will undergo an annual evaluation to see how well it is doing its job.

Stephens said, "What we've accomplished so far has been on a very modest budget. With more time and money in the future, we hope to tackle other important projects."

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